



Office of the Foster Youth Ombudsperson

Promoting the Highest Standards of Care for Foster Youth

Annual Report: July 1, 2025-June 30, 2026



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Purpose

Investigate decisions, acts, and other matters related to the health, safety, and welfare of youth in foster care to promote the highest attainable standards of competence, efficiency, and justice for youth who are in the care of the state.

[Sec. 260C.82 MN Statutes](#)

Budget

\$982,000 in FY26

Staff

6 FTE

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<https://linktr.ee/oofymn>

Executive Summary

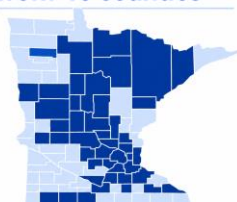
Established through legislation in 2022 and opened in May 2024, this report summarizes OOFY's second full year of operations. This included growth in staffing, youth outreach efforts, systems change advocacy, and published reports; and consistency in complaint and investigation volume, while continuing to solidify our agency foundation and structure.



4
public
investigative
reports



**Reviewed
231 concerns
from 46 counties**



In cases about a specific person, OOFY had direct contact with Fosters in **76%** of cases we reviewed.



About 2 out of 3 people who shared their race or ethnicity identified as people of color.

The most common concerns we heard were about

-  1 Placement Decisions
-  2 Services Offered to or Received by Fosters
-  3 Caregiver Conduct



Key Activities

Investigations and Public Reporting

OOFY observed a number of recurring themes across our intakes and investigations this past year:

- Foster youth spending extended time in inappropriate settings, including boarding for weeks and months in hospital emergency departments and hotel crisis respite. Youth experienced prolonged periods without consistent access to basic necessities and isolation from family and community supports
- Foster youth experiencing challenges with access to or continued eligibility for Extended Foster Care
- Lack of active and effective support for protecting foster youth's relationships with relatives, including their connection to siblings and consideration of relatives for placement and permanency
- Lack of appropriate reporting, assessment, and decision-making regarding safety and well-being concerns for foster youth in licensed homes and other settings

OOFY takes a variety of approaches to address these concerns, including educating foster youth about the roles of people on their team, providing information and resources, escalating concerns to local and state agency leadership and/or to the agency/team/division responsible for investigating the concern. Through OOFY's participation in various inter-agency workgroups and committees, we raise issues and case examples to highlight policy and practice areas needing improvement.

We also bring awareness to issues and make recommendations through a variety of published reports. OOFY issues public reports for selected issues to promote transparency and public awareness for issues impacting youth in foster care.

Systemic Investigative Reports

OOFY's first systemic investigative report **"Lacking Support for Sibling Connections"** was published in August 2025.

An updated status report with additional updated recommendations is in process.

OOFY published its first systemic investigative report in August 2025 after observing issues related to supporting sibling relationships for foster youth: [Lacking Support for Sibling Connections](#). This report summarizes concerns identified over one year of monitoring, and shared recommendations to ensure implementation of the Sibling Bill of Rights, passed in 2018 through leadership from Fosters.

In direct response to OOFY's recommendations, DCYF released several new and/or updated written practice guides and materials for foster youth:

- [DCYF Bulletin 26-68-05 Foster Care Sibling Bill of Rights](#) (March 2026)
- Updated, more youth-friendly version of the [Sibling Bill of Rights Notification form](#) (March 2026)
- [Foster Care Sibling Bill of Rights: Responsible social services agency requirements and instructions](#) (March 2026)
- [Practice Guide for Maintaining Family Connections for Children in Foster Care](#) (Updated March and June 2026)
- [Out-of-Home Placement Practice Guide](#) with clearer direction on the legal requirement to provide and support implementation of the Sibling Bill of Rights (February 2026)

DCYF is also hosting a webinar in late August 2026, which will be recorded for ongoing access, entitled “Permanency Coffee Talk: Sibling Connection and Permanency” through Foster Adopt Minnesota’s education program.

The Guardian ad Litem responded to OOFY’s report by inviting Ombudsperson Coonce to present at their annual Training Institute in October 2026. The GaL program also provided specific legal training on the topic to their staff across the state and increased their attention to the Sibling Bill of Rights in their advocacy and court reporting.

The investigative report received media coverage from the Imprint: [MN Ombuds Finds Foster Siblings Are Not Being Notified of Rights](#) and [How One MN County is Working to Keep Siblings Together](#)

Individual Investigative Reports

OOFY published three investigative reports regarding individual foster youth cases:

1. [202509-02](#): (published December 2025)

OOFY investigated efforts to ensure safety and well-being for a foster youth placed in hotel crisis respite. Issues included failures to support sibling contact, insufficient efforts to ensure access to therapeutic services and basic needs such as nutritious food and adequate clothing, and the overuse of emergency response services. This case represented issues OOFY observed with several other foster youth cases with extended stays in hotels and hospitals, due to lack of available options to better meet their needs.

OOFY’s report led to increased public awareness, including an article in the Imprint: [Ombuds Report Details Poor Treatment of Minnesota Foster Youth](#), and has led to the convening of many inter-agency meetings focused on short and long-term solutions for foster youth languishing in hospitals emergency departments and hotel crisis respite.

2. [202602-1](#): (published June 2026)

OOFY investigated concerns about several issues related to a licensed foster home, including the lack of reporting, cross reporting, communication, assessment, and investigation of possible child maltreatment, the absence of an initial phone call between the biological parents and foster parents,



and the lack of appropriate planning or completion of Reunification Structured Decision-Making Assessments prior to the Trial Home Visit.

3. [202603-01: \(published June 2026\)](#)

OOFY completed an investigation concerning delays in providing a young person adequate medical care, their lack of access to basic needs in a hotel crisis respite setting, the facility's insufficient documentation, and the agency's failure to implement and support the Sibling Bill of Rights.

Research Report – Experiences in Minnesota's Extended Foster Care Program

Recognizing the need to better understand the experiences of foster youth in Minnesota's Extended Foster Care (EFC) program, OOFY provided funding to ChildTrends to complete qualitative research into the topic. With OOFY's partnership to recruit participants, ChildTrends interviewed 28 Minnesota Fosters about their experiences with EFC, including how they learned about it, why they did or did not enroll, and their recommendations for improvement.

In September 2025 ChildTrends published a [full report](#) of their research, findings, and recommendations, and a [fact sheet](#) describing 3 key strategies to enhance EFC in Minnesota:

1. Start talking about extended foster care early, often, and through multiple channels.
2. Streamline enrollment and service delivery so Fosters can focus on their education, career, and self-sufficiency goals.
3. Support Fosters' journey to self-sufficiency through supportive, nonjudgmental conversations that prepare Fosters for life as young adults.

Strengthening Systemic Policies and Practices

Task Forces, Councils, and Workgroups

Through participation and leadership in convenings of agency leaders, staff, and community members, OOFY staff share and gain expertise, advocate for the centering of the needs and voices of Fosters, and help strengthen policies and practices that impact foster youth. Examples of OOFY membership in task forces and workgroups this year include:

Supreme Court Council on Child Protection and Maltreatment Prevention

Established by the legislature in 2024, the purpose of the Council is to “develop a comprehensive blueprint to improve Minnesota's child protection system and prevent unnecessary entry of children and families into the system.” The most recent [status report](#) was completed in June 2026 and the council's final report will be available December 15, 2026.



Ombudsperson Misty Coonce is an active member, including moderation of a panel of Fosters for the Council and co-facilitation of Foster focus groups for the council's community engagement efforts.

SOGIE Youth in Care Workgroup

This workgroup, facilitated by staff at the Department of Children Youth & Families, was born out of recommendations from Foster leaders to better support LGBTQIA2S+ foster youth in Minnesota. The group aims to understand how data on foster youth's Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Expression (SOGIE) is currently collected and documented, and provide guidance for best practice in assisting LGBTQIA2S+ youth in the state of Minnesota. A primary project this last year includes collaboration with Wilder Research to create and distribute, through partnership with several counties, a survey about youth experiences in foster care. An advisory council of Foster leaders provides feedback on key aspects of the research project. The final report is expected to be available in November 2026.

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce is an active member of the workgroup.

Children's Justice Initiative (CJI) Advisory Committee

The Children's Justice Initiative (CJI) Advisory Committee is the federally required multi-disciplinary task force for Minnesota's Court Improvement Program (CIP), known as CJI. The purpose of the CJI Advisory Committee is to provide guidance and expertise to CJI to introduce, develop, and strengthen system practices and policies for the promotion of improved outcomes of the well-being and safety of children who have experienced abuse or neglect.

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce is a member of the full committee as well as the Mental Health sub-committee.

Children's Justice Act (CJA) Task Force

The CJA Task Force is a federally mandated multidisciplinary advisory body, under the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), which (a) reviews and assesses how the child protection and criminal justice systems in Minnesota handle child maltreatment cases and (b) makes recommendations to DCYF for system improvement.

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce is a member of a subgroup focused on strengthening legal representation for youth in child protection and foster care cases. The group has focused on seeking input from youth attorneys and youth/young adults with direct lived experience through surveys and listening sessions, with efforts underway to offer surveys to Guardians ad Litem, judges and local agency case workers.

Hennepin County Child Protection Language Reform Workgroup

Convened in May 2026, this workgroup includes Hennepin County departments, court partners, and tribal nations members to ensure that language, written and verbal, used throughout the child protection system reflects a supportive, compassionate approach; shifting from punitive/compliant to



responsive/engagement. This project is one of seven recommendations from the Child Well-Being Advisory Committee’s 18-month review to address the drivers of disproportionality.

Investigator Tonia Lofton is a member, offering input on the impact of language on the experiences and outcomes of foster youth.

Legislative Advocacy

During the 2026 Legislative Session, OOFY continued advocacy efforts on legislation that is likely to impact the rights, care, safety, and well-being of foster youth and/or impact the operations of our agency.

OOFY championed advocacy on two bills:

“If the Foster Youth Bill of Rights had been in place during my time in care, I would have known about my right to expect a safe living environment. I would have had a voice in the decisions affecting my life.”

-FOSTER LEADER & COLLEGE STUDENT

Foster Youth Bill of Rights (HF 3024/ SF3154)

- Championed by OOFY and informed by the input of Fosters, this bill was introduced in the 2025 session to ensure that everyone, in every county, is operating from the same standard of care for foster youth.
- Bill Status: Did not pass. Heard in Children and Families Finance and Policy committee twice, passed through for consideration in their omnibus bill. Multiple Fosters testified in support of the bill, and the bill received over 175 sign-ons in support, including dozens of organizations.
- [Minnesota's Foster Youth Bill of Rights Stalls in Legislature | The Imprint](#)

OOFY Statutory Refinement Bill (HF3091/SF3881)

- Championed by OOFY to address gaps in our existing enabling statute regarding our ability to meet privately with foster youth, clarify prohibitions on retaliation for those contacting our office, and making sure we have access to the records and information necessary to do our work.
- Status: Did not pass. Heard in multiple committees.
- [Minnesota Foster Youth Ombuds Seeks Access to State Data System](#)

OOFY provided letters of support, testimony and/or technical assistance on the following bills:

- SF 3970/HF3002 | Modifying Eligibility for Extended Foster Care and Increased Access to Medical Assistance
- SF 4337/HF 4079 | Legal Support for Children in Foster Care
- SF 4635 | Foster Youth Federal Benefits Trust Fund Accounts
- SF 4360/HF 4206 | Extended Foster Care Services Grant Program
- SF2551/ HF 2136 | Forensic Interview Training Scholarships
- HF 4408 | Child Fatality and Near Fatalities Review Process and Public Disclosure
- SF 3981/HF3665 | Early Childhood Education Stability for Foster Youth
- SF 4879/HF 3714 | Prioritization for Fosters for School Programming
- SF4882/ HF 4732 | Luggage for Foster Youth ([Advocates Want Luggage, Not Trash Bags, for MN Foster Youth](#))



Pictured: OOFY staff, Rep. Jessica Hanson, Foster Youth Bill of Rights testers, and supporters from the Foster community.

Public Presentations and Meetings

Public presentations and meetings with organizations, agencies, and groups expand the OOFY's impact by sharing information with and getting feedback directly from others who are working to address and improve foster youth's experiences. Whenever possible, OOFY advocates for the inclusion of Fosters as presenters or panelists. Examples of public presentations this past year include:



Foster Panel at Minnesota Judge's training

National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges training, July 2025

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce facilitated a Foster panel comprised of three OOFY Advisory Board members (Vivian Dudley, Lucina Kayee, and Sage Desai) as part of the weeklong training for Minnesota judges hosted by the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. Panelists shared critical insight and recommendations for the judges to incorporate into their practice, including ways to increase meaningful participation of youth at court hearings and promoting accountability for decisions that impact Fosters.

A panelist reminded judges:

“For you, this is your field of work, and for us, it’s our lives, our safety, and our well-being. It’s important to listen to foster youth.”

What Permanency Meant and What Was Missing



Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare Permanency and Child Welfare Fall Conference, October 2025

In this keynote panel, facilitated by Ombudsperson Misty Coonce, five Foster professionals, leaders, and advocates shared honest reflections on what permanency looked like, where it fell short, and how system definitions sometimes miss the mark. This keynote invited child welfare professionals to listen deeply, remember the human impact of their work, and recommit to creating lasting connections that foster youth deserve.

Huge thanks to the wonderful panelists: Ada Smith, Renee Booth, Vivian Dudley, El Humphrey, and Erin Gantz

The Power and Purpose of Foster Youth Rights in Minnesota

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare Permanency and Child Welfare Fall Conference AND Guardian ad Litem Training Institute, October 2025

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce provided special presentations to child welfare workers and to Guardians ad Litem from across Minnesota, including an overview of issues identified by OOFY in supporting the existing Sibling Bill of Rights for foster youth, ideas for professionals' support in ongoing implementation, and how these efforts relate to the proposed Foster Youth Bill of Rights.

The increased presence of federal immigration enforcement agents in communities across Minnesota this past winter impacted our Foster community in unique ways. The racial disproportionality in the Minnesota foster care system is well documented. Many Fosters, especially those who are non-citizens, needed increased support and clear information about how their status may impact access to Foster-specific resources.

OOFY responded through participation in the following trainings and creation of resources:

- **Immigrant Youth in Minnesota: Youth, Access, and Experiences Through Care**

Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare, Spring Conference, "Meeting the Moment: Immigration and Child Welfare"

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce joined a panel of other Fosters and youth-serving professionals for a breakout session focused on legal and immigration basics, healthcare, benefits, and documentation, lived experience and youth impact.



- **Know Your Rights: Information and Resources for Non-Citizen Youth**

Foster Adopt Minnesota [recorded webinar](#) (March 2026)

Ombudsperson Misty Coonce joined immigration legal experts Pheng Thao and Alison Griffith to help foster parents, caregivers and professionals supporting youth to learn about rights of youth, safety planning essentials, and changes for non-citizen youth in 2026.

- OOFY contributed to Foster Advocates newly created [Know Your Rights Immigration & Documentation Guide for Fosters](#).
- OOFY advocated for the inclusion of accessible information on the impact of citizenship status for Medical Assistance eligibility for youth who aged out of foster care at age 18 or older on the Minnesota Department of Human Services (DHS) [website](#). OOFY also advocated for DHS to include Fosters in the creation and review process as they work on additional educational materials on Medical Assistance for Fosters.

Youth Outreach and Education

Know Your Rights Group Presentations

In the summer of 2025, OOFY embarked on significant youth outreach efforts, focusing on presenting about foster youth rights and an overview of our office, to youth in each of Minnesota's 4 PRTF (Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility) settings and at the Tomorrow's Leaders Today [conference](#).

Group presentations include the opportunity to meet 1:1 with OOFY staff to ask questions, get additional resources, and to share a concern or complaint. This year, we presented to 100 youth in our group presentations, which led to ongoing follow-up and/or investigations for 13 youth cases. One investigation that initiated with group outreach resulted in a public Findings and Recommendations report.



Foster Youth Informational Materials

OOFY continued our focus on ensuring foster youth have clear, accessible materials available to help them understand their rights and how to best raise their questions and concerns. This past year, OOFY added to the existing series of short videos (available on our [YouTube channel](#)) by updating and/or creating these written materials:

- OOFY agency overview [“A Place for Foster Youth to be Heard”](#)
- Foster Youth Rights [overview](#)

Individual foster youth outreach/investigative visits

In addition to group outreach presentations, OOFY prioritizes individual direct contact with foster youth during our intake and investigations processes. This year, OOFY had direct contact with Fosters in 76% percent of the cases that involved a specific foster youth, an increase from 65% the previous year. In some cases, we met with the foster youth multiple times, especially in situations of crisis placements and/or the foster youth experienced multiple moves in a short period of time.

Strengthening Agency Infrastructure

Recognizing the importance of ensuring that OOFY has the necessary staffing, internal controls, processes and policies to effectively fulfill our statutory mandates, OOFY completed the following in this past year:

- Comprehensive version of our staff manual, and created and/or updated required agency policies
- Updated our case management system to help track and pull data for stronger reporting out
- Sought and received approval for expanded access to records in the Minnesota Government Access (MGA) court record system
- Utilized our increased budget appropriation to transition our two Foster Youth Outreach and Engagement Specialist roles from temporary to permanent positions
- Updated intake processes to better prioritize contacts from Fosters and explored additional tools to increase accessibility for complainants
- Partnered with the OOFY Advisory Board to define [agency values](#) and to strengthen the board's understanding of their oversight role





Conclusion

Building a small agency continues to be a challenging and rewarding endeavor. We have borrowed best practices from other ombuds offices in the state and country, while tailoring our work to the needs of Minnesota foster youth. Most of our staff have spent time in foster care ourselves, and we are all passionate about improving the lives of foster youth and addressing the systemic barriers seen in our work.

In the year ahead, OOFY will continue addressing individual concerns while advancing systemic improvements. We are embarking on a project to create a comprehensive Foster Youth Rights handbook and pocket guide, and plan to increase our outreach and engagement activities with Minnesota foster youth, including those placed out-of-state.

Thank you to all of the partners, collaborators, agencies, workers, attorneys, Guardians ad Litem, legislators, caring adults, and community members who elevate and support our office and the [Fosters](#) in their lives. Most of all, thank you to the Fosters who share concerns with our office, give feedback on our materials, use your voice to shape a better system, and serve on our Advisory [Board](#). We would not be able to do our work without your powerful expertise.

Looking forward to another year,

The OOFY team